

# IS THE SOCIAL ANTIPOLITICAL? LINDA ZERILLI ON LIBERALISM, FEMINISM AND ARENDT

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## ¿ES LO SOCIAL ANTIPOLÍTICO? LINDA ZERILLI SOBRE EL LIBERALISMO, FEMINISMO Y ARENDT

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1. It is somehow bewildering to sit down today, in southern Europe, and read Linda Zerilli's *The Abyss of Freedom*, a theoretical feminist and political text published in 2005 in the United States. The distance is significant in every sense, especially because Zerilli sets out to rediscover *feminism* as a paradigmatic practice of *political freedom* distinct from social actions or claims. The first problem in this regard is that, in Italy and Europe (just as in the United States and other countries and continents that Zerilli does not consider), political freedom and democracy more generally faces an increasingly uncertain fate. The second problem is that certain themes and trajectories of feminism have been “recovered” and strategically employed –in part because of their “dangerous liaisons”<sup>1</sup>– by neoliberal

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1. See: N. Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism. From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, Verso, New York-London, 2013.

rhetoric and practices aimed at legitimizing the further reduction of the “public sphere” to market space and the consequent reduction in the freedom of women and others (or rather, in their “equaliberty”).

At any rate, re-reading *The Abyss of Freedom* today it is thus worth focusing on the “social issue” and its allegedly anti-political character. In other words, the issue can be summed up as follows: what are we talking about when we talk about freedom understood *strictly* as “political freedom”? In what sense, according to a famous thesis reintroduced by Arendt, would social claims endanger this fundamental form of freedom? But above all: can feminist thought unintentionally support the neoliberal move to discredit the “social issue”, as if *social* life were a sort of intruder in the celestial sphere of *political* life?

2. To begin from these questions inevitably entails a cross-cutting and selective reading of *The Abyss of Freedom*. While only briefly addressing other topics in the book, I would begin by noting that, through various pathways, Linda Zerilli often leads the reader to the best-known of Arendt’s dichotomies: the dichotomy between a *political space of “freedom”*, conceived from the Greek polis, and a social space of “necessity”, linked to the modern phenomenon in which, according to Arendt, issues associated with the private sphere expand into the public sphere. Much might be said –and something has been said– about Arendt’s belief that politics should not become involved with “natural” or “biological” needs and interests that seek satisfaction in bodily and economic activities, the real axis of the social sphere<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, Arendt overlooks important insights and forms of knowledge about the “nature-culture” topic, political economy and Marxian critique as well as the politics of bodies and their relations.

Linda Zerilli does not raise issues of this kind. However, while she does adopt Arendt’s distinction, she attempts to lessen the oppositional character of this distinction, namely its evident conflict with women’s history and the feminist assertion that “the personal is political.” It is for this reason that, in the final chapter dedicated to

2. See: E. Balibar, *Equaliberty. Political Essays* (2010), Duke University Press, Durham, 2014.

3. See, among others: F. Collin, “Agir et donné”, in A. M. Roviello, M. Weyembergh (eds.), *Hannah Arendt et la modernité*, Vrin, Paris, 1992, p. 29: “[Arendt] tend à méconnaître la part de symbolicité qui régit la gestuelle, qui informe l’ordre même des besoins et fait que manger n’est jamais simplement satisfaire la faim. D’où une sousestimation pour le labeur, comme si puiser de l’eau, couper du bois, cueillir des fruits n’avait qu’un sens fonctionnel, n’élaborait pas un système de rapports entre les êtres humains, et était étranger à l’ordre du langage”. I dealt with this issue (namely on Arendt and Marx) in I. Possenti, *Flessibilità. Retoriche e politiche di una condizione contemporanea*, ombre corte, Verona, 2012, p. 57 ff.; and with the “nature-culture” topic in I. Possenti, *L’apolide e il paria. Lo straniero nella filosofia di Hannah Arendt*, Carocci, Roma, 2002, pp. 35-53. See also: L. Zerilli, *The Arendtian Body*, in B. Honig (ed.), *Feminists theorize the Political*, Routledge, New York-London, 1992.

an Arendt-style reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, she views "judgment" (which assesses *particular* cases without employing *universal* criteria) as a crucial activity for feminist practices: a feminist politics should, in fact, be able to assess in each instance whether a particular social claim also expresses a desire for political freedom. From this perspective, however, Arendt's "social" concept is not called into question. The social issue is therefore subordinated to the issue of political freedom, a freedom that, in everyday life, *only* seems to be embodied in the domain of gender.

3. In the previous three chapters, Linda Zerilli explores feminist discussions of political freedom and effectively locates the "social issue" on the same level as the "issue of the subject".

According to Zerilli, in her influential novel *Les guérillères* Monique Wittig<sup>4</sup> considers the experience of the possible and absolute beginning, appearing to emphasize the courage of Arendt's "action". Indeed, first and foremost this freedom coincides with the possibility and risk of "starting" something new, that is, something that is wholly unforeseen and "without antecedents". Milan's Libreria delle Donne<sup>5</sup>, however, puts the stress on a second creative aspect of Arendt's "action", a feature that continually revitalizes and breathes new life into a common and plural world. The Italian group appears to pursue precisely this agenda in its work on the limits of emancipation-oriented politics; indeed, the Group describes the feminist experience as a "world-building practice", that is, the act of creating relational spaces in which women are free to act freely.

Within this framework, *The Abyss of Freedom* breaks new ground on the issue of the "subject" and feminist politics. Zerilli believes that "third wave" feminism was too quick to abandon the critical claim raised by European "difference feminism", judging it simply incompatible with the move to acknowledge differences among women. The point of departure for this philosophical trajectory is Judith Butler and her *Gender trouble*<sup>6</sup>, while the final destination, with the help of Arendt and Wittgenstein, is the proposal that we conceptualize "women" as the adaptable and performative product of feminist politics rather than erasing the "female" subject together with that politics.

In other words, according to Zerilli, feminism is still possible but it must change radically; its practices and theories must cease to revolve both around the social issue

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4. M. Wittig, *Les guérillères*, Minuit, Paris, 1969.

5. Libreria delle donne di Milano, *Non credere di avere dei diritti. La generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino, 1987 (published in English with the title *Sexual Difference: Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1990).

6. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990.

(or “emancipation”) and the issue of the subject (or, in keeping with the same concern, of “transforming gender relations”). Zerilli proposes that we focus on *action* rather than the *subject*. Understood in this context as including speech acts, action is “devoid of purpose” in the sense proposed by Arendt. That is, it has no external or specific purposes; rather, its sense lies in creating spaces in which it is possible to become “actors”. According to this perspective, the feminist practice of fostering relations among women might raise the issue of the subject, just as it might once again raise the “social issue” and the problem of rights depending on the case. Both of these issues would be secondary to feminism’s true *raison d’être*: freedom, understood in Arendt’s terms as a political freedom or the freedom to “act”.

4. Working in the wake of Arendt, Linda Zerilli conceptualizes political freedom as the worldly activities through which we contribute to shaping the world as a space of freedom and ourselves as free subjects. *The Abyss of Freedom*, however, contains multiple doubts regarding the political nature of social action and social claims, which are generally regarded as the expression of selfish needs and interests. Indeed, Arendt’s well-known argument in *On Revolution* holds that it was precisely the “social issue” that compromised the struggle for political freedom during the French Revolution. There is no move, therefore, to question the suspicions that have come to surround social rights in the neoliberal era—an era which pushes economically for the increasing commodification of labor, commodities and public services<sup>7</sup> while at the cultural level developing old and new rhetorics of “individual freedom” essentially defined as participation in the free market and its widespread dynamics of consumption and competition<sup>8</sup>. We thus come face to face with the anti-political character of liberalism, which begins by justifying the separation between “society” and “the state” and goes on to justify the incorporation of both society and state into the market economy, casting into crisis “socio-political” action—that is, action that embraces both “political freedom” and “social claims” by adopting alternative economic practices from reciprocity to redistribution and forms of exchange not yet understood as cornerstones of a “market society”<sup>9</sup>.

5. At this point it is worth noting that the concept of “society” derives from Latin, but its foundations are Greek: Aristotle speaks of *koinônia politike* (political community), an expression in which the second term is linked to *to koinon* (the common), and

7. D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005.

8. P. Bourdieu, “La précarité est aujourd’hui partout”, in Id., *Contre-feux*, Éditions Raisons d’agir, Paris, 1998.

9. K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944), Beacon Press, Boston, 2001.

which in Latin is normally translated as *societas civilis* (civil society, an expression I use here in the premodern sense). From this perspective, political life as such –that is, the life of citizens (*politai*), those who are “free”– cannot be extricated from social life: the community is *political* whenever it is organized in such a way as to make political freedom possible (an organization that also comprises the economic sphere, in the antique form of the domestic economy involving women and slaves). In the era of the Greek polis Aristotle refers to, this meant that “citizens” were men (not women), indigenous (not foreign), and masters (not slaves, servants or basic workers). Each of them was free, that is, he was able to participate on an equal footing with others in managing certain aspects of community life (such as the primary military and civil issues) because he ruled over women and slaves who took care of the other aspects (reproductive and productive). It was only in the age of modern revolutions that the idea of “equaliberty” (Balibar) was developed: in that period, and not before, we began to see the “egalitarian” idea of including all humans in the polis, that is, of liberating *the actors* and *activities* of the reproductive and productive sphere from a politically secondary, subordinate and dominated role.

This goal was not exactly achieved, however. Rendering the political sphere autonomous as state, that is, as a space for exercising sovereignty, led to the transformation of the community sphere into a “society” (“civil society” in the modern sense of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) with space for civil liberties but not the experience of political freedom<sup>10</sup>. In other words, it is specifically the liberal perspective that frames community life in a way that neglects this kind of freedom and conceptualizes “the social” in a way that begins to be anti-political.

Modern and contemporary social history has also envisaged and narrated different stories, however. The claims made by “women” (the adaptable and performative subject Zerilli writes about) have often viewed *welfare* and work differently than the liberal state, promoting socially oriented initiatives and cooperatives –empowering, not “charitable” ones– for managing common resources and public services. According to such an approach, social life is and remains a site of political freedom.

In demanding that they be paid the salary of specialized workers, the seamstresses of *We want sex*<sup>11</sup> seek to obtain recognition for their “concrete labour” with its history of learning processes and relationships, work that is not merely “abstract human labour”.

10. At the peak and decline of the political tradition that began with Hobbes, the list of sociological categories proposed by Max Weber does not even include the term “freedom”. In relation to this point, see: C. Colliot-Thélène, *Le désenchantement de l'état. De Hegel à Max Weber*, Minuit, Paris, 1992.

11. *We want sex (Made in Dagenham)*, directed by Nigel Cole, Great Britain, 2010.

This is why they show the manager their pieces of cloth, pieces he would not know how to arrange or sew together. These working women know that there is *logos* in each person's work and that enhancing the *logos* inherent in work is another way of making community into political community –a domain in which *animal laborans* is always already *zoon politikon*, a *political and social* animal.